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ABSTRACT

This document discusses the experience of a history professor at a two-year college. The professor's students sit placidly through class, exhibiting politeness, but no interest in the lecture. Different teaching methods are discussed. One solution would be to just accept the students as they are, deliver neatly packaged lectures, give multiple choice examinations, and make sure all students get high marks. To do so would be cheating students out of a good part of what a college education should entail: being challenged, learning to think analytically, learning to write in an organized, purposeful, and insightful way; thinking about things one had never thought of before; and changing one's mind about things one had always taken for granted. The instructor uses only essay examinations as the only way to check in any sort of real way to see if students have thought about the materials at all, if they have some sense of historical connections and chronology, and if they can see what is important and what is not. The examination questions are given out well in advance in the belief that the students are unable to cope with reading, thinking about, and answering a question in the same class time. The professor stops the lecture often, asking questions in order to get the students to participate. Occasionally carefully planned discussions in which students have an opportunity to represent different factions are scheduled. Also, students are assigned a family history project rather than a term paper because of poor library facilities and plagiarism problems, and these assignments usually arouse real interest and involvement. (DK)

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A is for Apathy

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I teach at Miami Dade Community College's Kendall Campus. I teach the survey courses in western civilization and American history. My students comprise a wide cultural mix. Most are youngsters, though nearly every class has an older adult or two, returning to college. All these students are well-groomed and dressed stylishly in the incredible variety of clothes one sees in the sub-tropics. Cheerful and pleasantly well- behaved, they seem genuinely touched by my efforts to make their classes interesting and to connect the history I am teaching to events in the current world. Though sometimes rude, for example, when they parade into class late, traipse across the classroom in front of me, and then pester a neighbor to find out what they have missed, they also quickly apologize if I complain about their lack of consideration. Their peaceful, cheerful faces project a serenity soothing to observe. Decorous and outwardly attentive, they make a classroom look good.

And yet at times I find it difficult to convince myself that they really are students in any definition of the word which I can easily recognize. These nice people don't seem to do anything other in class but sit in their plastic chairs and look peaceful and cheerful. It is almost as if they are part of the plastic chairs. They are polite but passive. They patiently wait through class, occasionally checking their wrist watches. They take notes thoughtfully. They endure. They seem to take no real interest in the courses' subject matters. They will not read a text except under extreme duress. Their exams reveal that they misspell even the most basic historical items--they have written down what they thought they heard, and not bothered to check anything.

Upon my telling my students of having been in New Mexico, and how much I enjoyed driving there, one young woman said that she had encountered nothing but terrible drivers when she had visited Cancun. When I tried to convince her that New Mexico and Mexico were different places, when I even pulled down the map and showed her Mexico and New Mexico--her face froze over into that placid, pleasant look people get when being harangued by a madman but are too polite to object. In a recent exam, students writing about the

Romans' use of poured concrete as a building material referred to it as port concrete, as in port wine, and as "poor" concrete. Romans built things which have lasted for two thousand years by using poor concrete. Another student, hearing the term "seminal philosopher," wrote, this being Florida, that Socrates was a Seminole philosopher.

Hearing an unfamiliar expression, students write it down phonetically the best they can and regurgitate it on an exam. They will memorize anything at the drop of a hat even though they have no idea at all what it means. Their intellectual curiosity has not been awakened yet, if ever it will be. They burn with zeal about absolutely nothing in the academic world. They are not even particularly curious.

Most of them have none of the educational baggage with which I entered college. Although they live in Florida, a southern state, none, for example, knows a thing about Robert E. Lee or why the South hated the North for umpteen years after the Civil War. In a recent class, none had any idea what "aristocrat" meant. They never watch PBS, newscasts, or indeed much TV at all--few admit even to watching MTV. They do know who Bart Simpson is, and Beavis and Butthead, but they have not read anything in the Bible, know Shakespeare only by name, never heard of Longfellow or Stephen Foster or Voltaire, have no idea what the Constitution contains, don't have a clue who Greta Garbo or Elizabeth I was, and on and on. Most have never traveled much beyond Disneyworld, two hundred miles north of their homes, and know virtually nothing about geography, whether US or European or world.

But even more distressing than their lack of background information, to me as teacher, is my students' lack energy and their exasperating innocence of mind. My students are placid and nice. They hope for a happy life. They expect to graduate from Miami Dade and then from a university and get a job, just out, at maybe $50,000 a year, and live happily ever after. I think they think that when they do go to work in that $50,000 a year job, they will sit placidly at desks, jotting down notes, and occasionally checking their wristwatches. And they don't feel they should have to do any real work along the way to this goal. They don't want to think, to be active, to study hard, to make decisions. They don't want to argue or ask hard questions or challenge anything or reassemble their thoughts on anything. They want courses they can pass without

thinking about them, get an A or a B, and then, mercifully, immediately forget what they have learned for the exams.

About the only time my students wave a hand frantically is when they want to know "Is this going to be on the test?" They like just to sit quietly and smell the flowers. After all, class is a time to rest from the pressures of jobs and families and social life. Trying to get any reaction from them is often very difficult; indeed, the only sure-fire thing I know, from many years of observing, that will always provoke ardent discussion is the Calvinist theory of predestination, which they have never heard of before, and which they all find outrageous, unfair, and preposterous. Unfortunately, teaching Calvinism occurs but once a year and then in December, at the very end of the term.

So, what to do? One answer is to accept the students as they are, bless them. Just deliver neatly packaged lectures and give multiple choice exams and make sure all students get A's or B's. I have colleagues, fortunately not in my history department, who teach that way. Some professors even show overheads with the day's outlines, key concepts, and key vocabulary printed out, so students can copy and memorize everything more efficiently and painlessly than they could if they had to guess what was or was not important.

But I just can't bring myself to do any of that. Not only would I be bored doing such, but I would feel that I was cheating students out of what at least part of a college education should entail: being challenged, learning to think analytically, learning to write in an organized, purposeful, and insightful way; thinking about things one had never thought of before, changing one's mind about things one had always taken for granted. This is what I want to do, and this is what I find it miserably hard to accomplish So, how do I attempt to battle the big A--Apathy?

I start off by accepting the fact that most students will not go though a metamorphosis in my classroom. My brief intrusion into their lives will not undo habits ingrained since childhood and apathy developed over many years. I also realize that college cannot do more than partially educate anyone, that education is a life-long commitment to read and watch and talk and think. I cannot, alone, pump the students full of all the history they never knew, don't know and will need to know, all in one term or two. I cannot be a

miracle worker. But I can try to make a minor difference. And I am determined to do this.

For one thing, I use only essay exams. Essay exams are a tedious chore to grade, and students don't like them. But they are the only way to check in any sort of real way to see if students have thought about the materials at all, if they have some sense of historical connections and chronology, if they can see what is important or not.

In the olden times when I was a student, professors popped the questions at you at the start of the exam. I find that my students of today are unable to cope with reading, thinking about, and answering a question all in the same class time, so I give the questions to the students well in advance of the exam. In order to get an A or a B, a student must, on the exam, present information not gone over in class, and must analyze or comment on the material in an original way. Most students find it very, very difficult to accomplish this goal, but I keep at it, and keep after the students, nonetheless. I count the grades at mid-term and late in the semester much more heavily than the grades at the first of the term, so that if light dawns for them only late in the term, it's still not too late to earn an excellent grade. Some students, only a minority, respond strongly to this method of teaching and by the end of the term are writing good analytic exam answers, full of information and full, also, of thought. Most students don't do that well; they are writing on what I assume in the olden times would have been around the ninth grade level, but most can pass, and I have staved off multiple choice exams for one more semester.

In the classroom, I stop my lectures often and ask questions. Often as not, this doesn't work; last term, my class responded with total, stunned silence when I asked, "what do you know about George Washington?" I wanted to dredge up the familiar cherry tree story and the false teeth story, as a way to get into a discussion of what there was about Washington that made him such an extraordinary leader. But frequently enough, a student will respond to either a factual or a theoretical question with enough of the "right" material to build on. I am exceedingly careful not to make a student who doesn't answer correctly feel bad, and sometimes even a wrong answer can lead to a right answer. The important thing is to try to get students to participate.

Occasionally I schedule a carefully planned discussion. Two examples follow. I present students with a series of rhetorical situations used by ancient Romans to get their sons to understand and defend Roman law and custom. One such, for example, involves a son captured by pirates, held for ransom, whose father refuses to send money. The daughter of the pirate offers to help the son escape, if he will marry her. The son agrees, escapes with the pirate daughter, and marries her. Later, back home, the father demands the son set his wife aside and marry someone politically and socially more desirable. The son refuses and his father disowns him. Now the student must argue who is right, according to Roman morality, father or son? I use about six of these, and find that students get excitedly involved in figuring out a Roman point of view.

Another example uses the hand-out you have in your hands. Students have read about and heard lectures on the classic laissez-faire economists and on the 19th century socialists, and in the classroom I divide them into two groups: proletariat and bourgeois. There is a perfectly valid bourgeois explanation for every detail in the scenario, as there is a valid socialist explanation. This discussion often leads to incredibly heated arguments.

I make American history students argue the subject of slavery from the points of view of a Southern landowner, a poor white farmer, a slave, and a northern abolitionist. These exercises work , I think, because the students know up front that there is not a "right" way or a "wrong" way to answer, that a number of points of view can be defended legitimately.

Because of our extremely poor library, and because of monumental plagiarism problems, I do not assign a traditional term paper in my honors western civ class, second semester; what I do demand is a family history. This project, universally greeted suspiciously by my students, is almost always totally worthwhile, and the most valuable part of the experience is the excitement it arouses in many of my students. One young woman learned in great detail of her great grandmother's life in Cuba during the Spanish American war, and of the death, in a smallpox isolation hut, of her great-grandfather during that war, and of her great-grandmother's invincible determination to keep her family together. The great-grandmother had died at age 103, and my student had known her only as an incredibly old lady who loved to eat cake with her

grandchildren. Thanks to her paper, my student now knew of the fire and steel which were part of her heritage--antidotes, both of them, to apathy.

One term I impulsively required all my Western civ students to go to see the just-released Mel Gibson version of Hamlet and to write a brief, carefully directed, reaction paper on it. The movie had absolutely nothing to do with what we were "on" at the moment, but I insisted they go anyway. Most of them grumbled at the thought of going to see Shakespeare, but almost all of them, upon seeing the movie, reported being totally absorbed in the story and its personalities and in the wonderful setting. Although the movie was far removed from the topic we were "on" in the classroom, the class and I talked about it during part of one period, and most of the students became involved in the discussion. Another year, three of my students came to see me with great excitement, having seen the movie "Dangerous Liaisons." I remember them so clearly, standing next to my desk in the classroom, their faces animated and excited, their voices tumbling over each other, telling me that half way through the movie they had agreed that this was a "movie Cubbison had to go to!" Their excitement fueled my engines for at least a week.

The easiest thing in teaching, the course of least resistance, is to give in, give your students what they want, use the same notes, get the testing department to grade your multiple choice exam chosen from a test bank that accompanied your text, and find better things to do with your time. But for the many teachers who don't want to do that, teaching even at a community college is a constantly renewed call to learn more, to change lectures, to reshape exams, and to look for new ways to reach students. Only by keeping hopes high, energy recharged, minds engaged, can a teacher avoid succumbing to the very apathy found in so many students.

Apathy flows in and stays with you much like the Mississippi in total flood--there you are, up to your neck in it. But with good humor and determination and hard work, you may be able to turn some of it aside, at least some of the time. The battle is worth the energy, even if victories are fleeting.